

The Grammar Translation Method

Overview

Latin and Ancient Greek are known as "dead" languages, based on the fact that people no longer speak them for the purpose of interactive communication. Yet they are still acknowledged as important languages to learn (especially Latin) for the purpose of gaining access to classical literature, and up until fairly recently, for the kinds of grammar training that led to the mental dexterity considered so important in any higher education study stream.

Latin has been studied for centuries, with the prime objectives of learning how to read classical Latin texts, understanding the fundamentals of grammar and translation, and gaining insights into some important foreign influences Latin has had on the development of other European languages. The method used to teach it overwhelmingly bore those objectives in mind, and came to be known (appropriately!) as the *Classical Method*. It is now more commonly known in Foreign Language Teaching circles as the *Grammar Translation Method*.

It is hard to decide which is more surprising - the fact that this method has survived right up until today (alongside a host of more modern and more "enlightened" methods), or the fact that what was essentially a method developed for the study of "dead" languages involving little or no spoken communication or listening comprehension is still used for the study of languages that are very much alive and require competence not only in terms of reading, writing and structure, but also speaking, listening and interactive communication. How has such an archaic method, "remembered with distaste by thousands of school learners" (Richards and Rodgers, 1986:4) persevered?

It is worth looking at the objectives, features and typical techniques commonly associated with the Grammar Translation Method, in order to both understand how it works and why it has shown such tenacity as an acceptable (even recommended or respected) language teaching philosophy in many countries and institutions around the world.

Objectives

Most teachers who employ the Grammar Translation Method to teach English would probably tell you that (for their students at least) the most fundamental reason for learning the language is give learners access to English literature, develop their minds "mentally" through foreign language learning, and to build in them the kinds of grammar, reading, vocabulary and translation skills necessary to pass any one of a variety of mandatory written tests required at High School or Tertiary level.

Some teachers who use the method might also tell you that it is the most effective way to prepare students for "global communication" by beginning with the key skills of reading and grammar. Others may even say it is the "least stressful" for students because almost all the teaching occurs in L1 and students are rarely called upon to speak the language in any communicative fashion.

More conservative teachers from more conservative countries are even likely to be put out by anyone merely questioning the method, and a typical response could be "because that's the way it's always been done - it's the way I learned and look, now I'm a professor". The point being, the method is institutionalized and considered fundamental. Such teachers are probably even unaware that the method has a name and can be compared alongside other methods.

Key Features

According to Prator and Celce-Murcia (1979:3), the key features of the Grammar Translation Method are as follows:

- (1) Classes are taught in the mother tongue, with little active use of the target language.
- (2) Much vocabulary is taught in the form of lists of isolated words.
- (3) Long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar are given.
- (4) Grammar provides the rules for putting words together, and instruction often focuses on the form and inflection of words.
- (5) Reading of difficult classical texts is begun early.
- (6) Little attention is paid to the content of texts, which are treated as exercises in grammatical analysis.
- (7) Often the only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue.
- (8) Little or no attention is given to pronunciation.

Typical Techniques

Diane Larsen-Freeman, in her book *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* (1986:13) provides expanded descriptions of some common/typical techniques closely associated with the Grammar Translation Method. The listing here is in summary form only.

- (1) Translation of a Literary Passage
(*Translating target language to native language*)
- (2) Reading Comprehension Questions
(*Finding information in a passage, making inferences and relating to personal experience*)
- (3) Antonyms/Synonyms
(*Finding antonyms and synonyms for words or sets of words*).
- (4) Cognates
(*Learning spelling/sound patterns that correspond between L1 and the target language*)
- (5) Deductive Application of Rule
(*Understanding grammar rules and their exceptions, then applying them to new examples*)
- (6) Fill-in-the-blanks
(*Filling in gaps in sentences with new words or items of a particular grammar type*).
- (7) Memorization
(*Memorizing vocabulary lists, grammatical rules and grammatical paradigms*)
- (8) Use Words in Sentences
(*Students create sentences to illustrate they know the meaning and use of new words*)
- (9) Composition
(*Students write about a topic using the target language*)